

Notes from an A-Bomb Tour

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From the time I landed in Japan seeking initiation into the Old Buddhist world, I felt the need for a pilgrimage, a witness—dare I say even an homage—to the most horrifying and devastating of the myriad conditions that have given rise to American Zen. I understood that through a perversity of interdependence, I owe the A-bomb some measure of gratitude for the Zen practice that has given me my own life.

My Japanese Roshi did not approve of my A-bomb tour to Hiroshima and, later Nagasaki. He didn't object to an A-bomb tour per se, though he'd been an underage kamikaze pilot trainee himself, and the A-bomb not only devastated his country, but put him out of a job, and set off a crisis of meaning that would lead him eventually to find Zen. In fact, he didn't even know my months away from the monastery would include the tour at all. All he saw and all that mattered to him was that another puffed-up, Western, so-called disciple was making his own plans and enacting his own agenda. He was furious that someone claiming to be devoted to him would take a break from the monastery. That I left anyway was an early moment of truth for me, a realization that the culture gap wouldn't be quite so easy to leap across.

Nothing happens in Hiroshima. Nothing to remember, *moningu supeshuru* of eggs and coffee, tears at statues' feet, and rain. Nothing much of note: the green, statted memorial an island in the urban sea, the love hotels. I'm a Zen monk after all, and don't—I swear—call any of the numbers underneath the naked women pictures plastered on the phone booths when I try to call home saying, "Listen, I've spent the day in tears but *nothing happened* in Hiroshima." Nothing of note: schoolgirls giggling, eternal flame.

One considers calling. I, for one, consider calling: daisy in a burnt field. *No, no, don't even think, just dial home, just don't look up.* Television in the hotel room, *Amerika no EMU-TI-BI*. Haven't seen pop stars in a long time. We're dropping bombs again; the girl-stars seem even younger than before, the he-stars seem more violent, uglier somehow. Perhaps it's just the context—was the dead child in the mother's arms, or child in dead mother's?—MTV does not address these questions, and it's sweltering and damp and all the bread and chocolate I eat won't satiate my temple-riced intestines.

Something happened in Hiroshima so terrible that I cannot maintain my gaze. I could say something: tens of thousands, flesh and bone *evaporated*. Einstein's tears, bureaucrats move paperwork from files "active" to "inactive," geopolitics unfold, Buddha's body pulses, children wail beside mothers' melting skin... I could speak, but Hiroshima escapes me. Eggs and coffee. Tourists, businessmen, some school kids, and rain.

As for Nagasaki, something happens here: I see a giant turtle. An enormous turtle building with a Buddhist statue, Kannon—Mercy—on top. I forget already why it is a turtle. One gets cried-out, you know, and has to just move on. The whole city here waiting, alive.

With my oversized red backpack and my undersized black monk's clothes—*gaikokujin* in *samue*—streetcar to the adult part of town where children roam with lustful eyes. A few stares; some giggles. The city pulses. Go to where the rooms are cheap, you know. Don't watch the women.

I can't say about the children. Little children at the hypocenter. A huge black column marks ground zero. Next to it, a piece of wall from the bombed-out Catholic church, with a little sculpted angel perched on top. Largest cathedral in East Asia at the time—Mass was in session when the bomb... Little toddlers wearing orange caps. A pre-school must be near here. We all need to run around somewhere. Can I tell you how they play around the smooth stone monument? They kiss and waddle, fall and squeal delight.

Is there something more? Shall I pin my eyes open or have lunch—an overpriced baguette, convenience store cheese. Breath lingers in my chest, my head hurts. Sick from crying, I stop. I'm in a park, a bus rolls by. A mother and her child cut across the lawn; old woman leans against her ice-cream stand. A gentle rain begins.

“Good morning—welcome back,” my American friend Erin whispers to me at Gendoji. Meditation is over, but breakfast is delayed. Waiting for the meal bell, we linger at the row of six *Jizo-sama* statues with their smooth heads and their monks' staves. Saint of travelers and children; saint of hell. We have just offered them their morning bath with ladles full of water, intoning, “*Om kaka kabi samma e sowaka.*”

Her eyes are damp with tears.

“The bombs are falling,” I whisper back. She nods.

There is a dog outside a nearby house—we pass him sometimes, on alms rounds or exercise. He is tied in a cement patio. Sometimes his shit is next to him: he scoots as far away as his short leash allows. In meditation we sometimes hear his howls. I wonder if I should get up and go to him; or after meditation if I should slip out the little door beside the closed main temple gate, and go to him. Stroke his mangy white fur, weep with him. I know that if I were a saint, I would rise from meditation, let the dog go. He would lick my face, then run into the hills—I don't know—cavort with monkeys and raccoons, live happily after.

Harold the Brit goes to the library and looks up cricket scores. I guess it's a real game—I don't understand it although outside the meditation hall he once tries explaining it to me. Wickets are involved. Along with cricket, updates on our progress: nearing Baghdad.

Our abbot says, “Right hand, left hand,” and sighs. Who wrote about the loneliness of a Zen Master's grief?—it's that their eyes see beings flailing in flowers. He says, for us it's just to realize the Truth. That all is one. That all is peace.

I want to know what that will do. I want to know why I can't bring myself to slip out of the gate and go to that white mangy dog, and weep with him. I want to know how we got it in our heads that we could save the world if we just didn't do anything at all. When did we start to think that if we sat still enough, it would all stop hurting?

In meditation, the dog howls. We sit silent, eyes resting on the clay wall. I can't hear the bombs from here—a sweet potato vendor's truck sings out its looped recorded jingle. Rain pounds on the tin roof, slaps against the windows.